

Good evening legislators, I am Cheryl Sharp, a life time Connecticut resident, a Civil Rights Attorney employed by the State of Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities for the past 15 years, and a lifetime civil and human rights advocate, and I am here as a concerned citizen in support of the African American Affairs Commission.

The issues and concerns of African Americans should be considered in all aspects of Connecticut's legislative and governing processes. The African American Affairs Commission serves a vital function, and is operating to identify and address the critical educational, health care, environmental, criminal justice, juvenile justice, family and child welfare, business and economic development, housing and civil rights needs of its constituents. In short, the agency is the legislative voice for African Americans in many aspects of our lives. The role of this Commission is always vital to establishing equality among the citizens of Connecticut—and has become more necessary in recent years due to the layoffs of state employees in 2003 that resulted in the dismantling of the Education and Outreach Department of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities. The Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities has been stripped to its core and needs the work of the African American Affairs Commission and Commissions like it to support, supplement and assist the state in rooting out discrimination and preserving civil and human rights. Thus, the work of this Commission and Commissions like it is not duplicative. This Commission and Commissions like it do not represent the bloat in state government. To the contrary, this Commission and Commissions like it provide essential services that we cannot afford to do without.

The Executive Branch's position, as articulated by the Governor, is that during good economic times Commissions such as the African American Affairs Commission serve a purpose, but during tough economic times, we can't afford this Commission or the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission or the Commission on Aging or the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women or 25% of the already understaffed Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities—the Waterbury and Norwich Regional Offices of the Commission, or the Asian Affairs Commission or the Commission on Aging. This position is short sighted, the fallout from the elimination of this Commission and Commissions like it will be too great, the despair of the Connecticut citizens affected will run too deep, and the cost of failing to honor, respect and protect diversity, civil and human rights and equality will be insurmountable.

The mission of the African-American Affairs Commission (AAAC) is to improve and promote the economic development, education, health and political well-being of the African-American community in the State of Connecticut. If this Commission and Commissions like it are eliminated there will be no one available to perform their vital functions, no agency of state government to adequately serve their clients, no federal equivalent to pick up the slack. Equally as alarming, the proposed budget while calling for the elimination of this

Commission and others like it, also calls for the elimination of 25% of the staff of the state's civil rights agency—so how will citizens of Connecticut be served? This has to be as important to each legislator as it is to each of his or her affected constituents—equality, civil rights and equal opportunity are woven into the fabric of our great state, and now when our state faces such great challenges, is not the time to abandon our progressive government and diminish our hope for equality in the state with the oldest state Civil Rights Agency of its kind. Thank you.